

Gender Differences in Teaching Styles

By Paul Bress

Men and women are often said to have different communication styles. This article reports on teaching styles and on a case study to establish whether such differences really exist, among both inexperienced and experienced teachers. The practical applications of the findings are also considered.

General Differences Between the "Genderlects"

According to Tannen (1992), there are fundamental differences between men's and women's ways of communicating, which she terms "genderlects," as a takeoff on language dialects. She maintains that a man's world focuses on competition, status, and independence (the guiding principle being "we're separate and different"). Meanwhile, a woman's world focuses on intimacy, consensus, and interdependence (the guiding principle being: "We're close and the same.").

Tannen concludes that these perspectives on life (and the genderlects that go with them) are learnt in early childhood in same-sex groups. That is to say, boys learn to compete in hierarchical groups, while girls learn to cooperate in small groups in which mutual liking is important. As an example of such differences, Tannen cites reasons given by U.S. men and women who have decided to become professors. While the men said they had joined the profession in order to gain freedom and independence, the women said they had joined it simply because they liked teaching.

Lecturing or listening?

Studies by Leet-Pellegrini (1980), Aries (1976), and Fox (1990) suggest that men feel comfortable in a lecturing role—a role which is learnt at an early age through role models. This lecturing is a demonstration of expertise, and therefore status. Meanwhile, women apparently feel comfortable in a listening role (also learnt through role models). This listening shows a desire to cooperate, bond, and be liked—by-products of a world of connections, not status. Women feel more comfortable sharing their expertise with others, rather than rivaling others with it

These two contrasting worlds may well lead to a communication breakdown when men and women talk to each other. Women want to be listened to more (especially with "um" and "yeah" listening signals) and lectured at less. Meanwhile, men want to be listened to in a quietly attentive way (without the "um" and "yeah" listening signals), and they also want women to be less passive and take more initiative.

Decision making

In the area of decision making, again we can see contrasting worlds. Ong (1989) suggests that the male world is based on "adversativeness" and that this manifests itself in sport, "friendly aggression," and ritualistic behaviour, such as teasing. Such behaviour leads to intimacy between

men, and according to Lever (1976), prepares males for a world of competitive work. In contrast, Ong states that females are encouraged to keep the peace. In this way, it could be argued that women are thus prepared for a world of interpersonal relationships.

So the two worlds again collide when it comes to decision making. Women see the orders that men give as unnecessarily provocative, challenging, and aggressive, while men see the suggestions that women make as infuriating and bossy. Men appear to want women to act like men, and women want men to act like women.

Dealing with problems

Dorval (1990) carried out detailed research into conversations between same-sex groups of different ages. Each group was instructed to discuss something serious. Such conversations Tannen would term "problem talk."

Again there were clear differences between boys and girls. As far as body language was concerned, boys sat at angles to each other and their gaze was not anchored on the other's face, while the girls sat close together (usually opposite each other) and their gaze was anchored on the other's face. As far as the conversation was concerned, the boys produced a mass of short spurts of speech. There was much teasing (which Leaper [1988] terms "negative reciprocity"), and much defiance (possibly because they felt in a one-down position). Meanwhile, the girls produced big blocks of talk and were obedient, and there was much attentive listening and sympathizing.

Men and women observing these videotaped conversations almost invariably praised the behaviour of their own sex. So it would seem that the style of dealing with problems continues into adulthood. In other words, men downplay or dismiss the problems of other men, or they change the subject. They do this to try to minimize the problem. In contrast, women listen to and confront problems, and reinforce other women. The two approaches are poles apart, but they both serve to maintain friendships within a certain rule system.

Case study

Hypothesis

Bearing in mind the background information, I wanted to discover whether gender differences resulted in different teaching styles. I hypothesized that inexperienced teachers would demonstrate bigger gender differences in teaching style than experienced teachers. I also thought women might find it more difficult giving clear instructions and might also feel uncomfortable in teacher-centred phases of a lesson. Meanwhile, I thought men might be insensitive to problems in class and also have an over-detailed lecturing style in teacher-centred phases of a lesson. I hypothesized that such initial gender differences would disappear gradually with experience—until both genders taught in a fairly standardized gender-neutral way.

Procedure

I observed three male teachers and three female teachers (each of whom had more than ten years of teaching experience) and three male teachers and three female teachers (each of whom had less than one year of teaching experience). I observed each teacher for 1.5 hours, for a total time

of 18 hours. I told each teacher that I was doing some research into gender differences but gave them no additional information or feedback until the research was completed. (This was agreed upon prior to the observation.)

While I observed each lesson, I checked boxes in the following chart (the small print tells exactly what I was looking for):

Giving Instructions		
"Male-like" impolite ordering around	Neutral direct, clear	"Female-like" indirect, unclear

Dealing with Problems		
"Male-like" problems ignored or downplayed	Neutral problems confronted	"Female-like" teacher mentions own problems

Teacher-centred Style		
"Male-like" overdetailed lecturing style	Neutral teacher comfortable, efficient	"Female-like" teacher uncomfortable

Every tick in the neutral boxes represented a relatively gender-neutral approach to teaching. Every tick in the "male-like" or "female-like" boxes denoted something I considered to be "overmale" or "overfemale"—that is, the teacher's gender influenced the lesson in some way.

Clearly, we must consider some caveats when evaluating the validity of results. One is that the teachers were affected by my presence. Another is that this is a subjective study, and perhaps I judged from a male perspective (see Dorval's research). However, it was in fact women who fared a fraction better in terms of overall efficiency (their style was not overly male or female). Finally, when judging teaching style, I sometimes found myself wavering between boxes. Nonetheless, I feel that the overall distribution of ticks did reflect the teaching style of each teacher over the course of the 90 minutes of observation.

Results

The results of the class observations follow in Figure 1 below. Bearing in mind the caveats above, examine the principal findings:

- Experienced teachers (of both sexes) accumulated a lot more ticks in the neutral boxes, that is, they taught in a much more efficient way.
- Despite this, if one of the experienced teachers did not get a neutral rating, then the bias (with only one exception) corresponded to the gender of the teacher.
- In comparing the results for inexperienced and experienced teachers, teaching indeed becomes much more efficient over time. However, where there is a deviation from efficient teaching, it is that women tend to be "over-female" (for example, instructions are not as clear as they could be)

and men tend to be "over-male" (for example, they may ignore problems or engage an overdetailed lecturing style).

Conclusion

Of course, there are other variables that come into play besides the gender of a teacher when considering the most appropriate teaching style, including the gender balance, age range, and cultural backgrounds of the students. But the above findings on teacher gender and teaching style can be useful in at least two ways. First, teacher trainers should be more aware of the possible correlation between a trainee's gender and teaching style. Second, experienced teachers need to be aware of any residual gender influence in their teaching. In both cases, monitoring and adapting teaching styles can help.

References

- Aries, E. 1976. Interaction patterns and themes of male, female, and mixed groups. *Small Group Behaviour*, 7, pp. 17–18.
- Dorval, B., ed., 1990. *Conversational coherence and its development*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Fox, T. 1990. Gender interests in reading and writing. In *The social uses of writing: Politics and Pedagogy*, pp. 51–70. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Leaper, C. 1988. *The sequencing of power and involvement in girls' and boys' talk*. Manuscript submitted for publication, Psychology Department, University of California, Santa Cruz.
- Leet-Pellegrini, H. 1980. Conversational dominance as a function of gender and expertise. In *Language: Social psychological perspectives*, eds. H. Giles, W. Robinson, and P. Smith. New York: Pergamon.
- Lever, J. 1976. Sex differences in the games children play. *American Sociological Review*, 23, pp. 478–483.
- Ong, W. 1989. *Fighting for life: Contest, sexuality, and consciousness*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Tannen, D. 1992. *You just don't understand*. New York: Virago Press.

Paul Bress teaches at Hilderstone College, Broadstairs, Kent, United Kingdom.

Figure 1

	Experienced Male		
	"male-like"	neutral	"female-like"
Giving instructions	0%	100%	0%
Dealing with problems	7%	93%	0%
Teacher-centred style	16%	84%	0%
	Experienced Female		
	"male-like"	neutral	"female-like"
Giving instructions	0%	91%	9%
Dealing with problems	1%	95%	4%
Teacher-centred style	0%	100%	0%
	Inexperienced Male		
	"male-like"	neutral	"female-like"
Giving instructions	24%	63%	13%
Dealing with problems	39%	61%	0%
Teacher-centred style	40%	50%	10%
	Inexperienced Female		
	"male-like"	neutral	"female-like"
Giving instructions	0%	55%	45%
Dealing with problems	4%	96%	0%
Teacher-centred style	0%	93%	7%